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# The ZigZag Way

Anita Desai

## About the Author

Anita Desai was born and educated in India. Her published works include award-winning novels, three of which have been shortlisted for the Booker Prize, most recently *Fasting, Feasting* in 1999. She has also written children's books and short stories. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as a Fellow of Girton College, Cambridge. Her novel *In Custody* was filmed by Merchant Ivory Productions. She has lived and travelled in Mexico, where part of this novel was written, and she now lives in New York state.

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Anita Desai

# THE ZIGZAG WAY

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VINTAGE

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TO KIRAN, WITH THANKS  
FOR HER COMPANIONSHIP

After half an hour's silence my brother irrelevantly exclaimed:

'What agreeable people one runs across in queer, out-of-the-way places!'

'Who on earth are you thinking of now?' I enquired.

'Why, I was thinking of *us!*' he placidly replied, and went on with his reading.

Charles Macomb Flandreu, *Viva Mexico!*, 1908



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## PART I

### Eric Arrives

The ancient Chinese believed time is not a ladder one ascends into the future but a ladder one descends into the past.

## *Chapter 1*

. . . Oh, tourist,  
is this how this country is going to answer you

and your immodest demands for a different world, and a better life, and complete comprehension of both at last, and immediately . . .

Elizabeth Bishop, 'Arrival at Santos', 1952

'There is only the one inn,' he was told when, on getting off the bus, he asked where he might stay.

Since the inn was directly across the square from where the bus had stopped, he could not have missed it even in the dusk. The wind that had scraped and scoured the hills around till the stones gleamed white now struck the tin signboard against the wall of the inn with the sound of a bell striking the hours, drawing his attention to it.

He buttoned up his jacket, sank his chin into the folds of his scarf, picked up his bag and set off towards the house on a path under the casuarina trees, passing an empty fountain with a broken spout. The houses around the square were all shut and dark, no window or door to let light fall across the pillared arcades except for the store at the corner where a few men had gathered under a bare electric bulb as if for warmth; it was from them he had enquired about lodgings. Now they watched him as he crossed the square to the inn and continued to watch as he knocked again and again at the door. If they said anything to each other, he could not hear them for the sound of the wind coming through the casuarinas and the tin signboard beating.

Finally, a woman let him in. She was engaged in conversation with someone in the room behind and did not stay but withdrew, leaving him in the darkness of the hall. He could make out a desk, a massive carved one like a

house with many doors, all shut, but no one attended it. A row of keys hung from a shelf above it on which some short stout candles flickered and poured out pools of soft tallow. They cast their uncertain light on a skull with green sequins for eyes and a circlet of gilt marigolds for a crown. Above this, on the wall, whole skeletons danced and cavorted, rustling in the draught from the door, for they were cut out of paper.

He watched them and listened to a clock ticking somewhere, mesmerised. In the room beyond he could see light and a fire, people and movement - real, living, not papery or skeletal or funereal. The clattering sound of metal pans and earthenware told him it was the kitchen. That was promising, but no one seemed interested in the appearance of a stranger.

Eventually someone, someone else, did come down a staircase from the upper regions of the house and greeted him, a young woman with her dark hair tied back in a ribbon. She pushed up the sleeves of her red sweater as if for business and when he asked if she had a room, slid a form across the desk for him to fill in. 'How many nights?' she asked, but when she saw him hesitate, shrugged, indicating he could put down what he liked, it did not matter. Unhooking an iron key eight or ten inches long, she offered to show him a room.

He followed her down a dark stairwell which had dim lamps attached to a stone wall at such long intervals that there were stretches of stone steps where no light was cast at all. Deeper and deeper down she took him, her felt slippers making no sound, and it was as if they were going further and further back in time, finally reaching a period that was surely medieval, for the door they arrived at seemed hewn with an axe; when she turned the immense key in its immense lock, it creaked open on what he feared would be a cellar if not a dungeon.

Instead, when she switched on an electric light, the room blazed into colour, proving improbably cheerful. There was a vast bed heaped with red cushions on a white counterpane, a sheepskin rug on the floor and white cotton curtains at a high, small window. She spun the tap at the washbasin to show him it worked and water flowed, and smiled to see him smile with relief, lower his bag on to a chair and nod to indicate he would take the room.

'Upstairs is the restaurant where you may eat,' she told him and, laying out a clean towel for him, disappeared.

As he washed his face with a block of soap, then scrubbed with the thick, dry towel, he thought of the days and nights he had spent on the train, slowly, sadly rattling over the lonely plains, struggling to achieve the horizon where hills rose to break the oppressive flatness only to find them mysteriously receding and remaining elusive, and then the hours on the bus through the valley with its strange twisted forms of cacti rising out of the volcanic rubble like stakes rising from secret graves. He had almost ceased to believe the town existed, that it was anything more than a legend, this ghost town of the sierra.

This perception had been magnified on entering the inn; now he felt slightly ashamed of his lack of faith, the many weak moments of panic he had had. He thought of himself cutting the figure of a timid pilgrim who sinks down in despair again and again along the way, needing to be coaxed and assisted into rising and going on, and avoided looking at himself in the tin-framed mirror as he rubbed his hair dry.

Upstairs, in the restaurant, the door to the kitchen stood open. Light streamed in as well as the sounds of pots rattling and voices animated by food, drink and company. The aroma of food being prepared over open fires was enough to raise his wavering spirits and make him anticipate the comfort of a meal and a drink. Some of the

tables were already occupied. Two men who looked like officials sat drinking beer and eating nachos, expansive in their gestures and speech as if pleased with themselves and how profitably their day had passed. At another table, some young men, still boys, alternately brushed back their hair and drank from bottles of Coca-Cola, then got up to go into the kitchen and returned with plates of food. In a corner, an elderly couple sat trying to feed a small boy who knelt on the bench beside them but seemed more interested in playing with his bowl of soup than in eating from it. They coaxed him; he turned his head away and splashed the soup with his spoon.

Then a young man came out of the kitchen where he had been laughing so that the after-image of his laugh lingered on his face, and crossed the room to their table, took the spoon away and sat down, taking the child on his lap and indicating that he would feed him.

It was a domestic scene and Eric was not particularly drawn to domesticity but, deciding there was enough evidence of nourishment, chose a nearby table and waited for a menu to be presented. One of the women in the kitchen came out and handed him one and he ordered a bottle of red wine straight away, with food to follow. As he expected, most of the items on the menu proved unavailable – they had, in fact, seemed a bit improbable – only one dish was actually available and it was brought to him, undeniably hot and reviving. He drank, ate and watched the family at the neighbouring table more tolerantly: domesticity clearly had its points.

But now the child slipped off the young man's lap and ran about the room, shouting in triumph at his escape. The elders all laughed. The child had the transparent grey-blue eyes and head of silky golden curls that make anyone popular at first glance. The young man possessed a slightly more worn version. The older couple was short and dark which made the child's fairness the more distinctive.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, he darted across to Eric's table and began to bang his spoon on its edge as if aware he was both naughty and pretty and would attract attention but not censure. The young man, the father, came rushing over to pick him up in his arms and kiss him, laughing. Then he apologised to Eric and sat down at his table, holding the child on his lap.

'He has only just learned to run - and so he runs everywhere. He makes us run too,' he explained. 'If we don't catch him, he will run out on the street, he is so quick.'

'It seems safe,' Eric replied. 'There is no traffic.'

'Oh, it is coming, coming soon, more every day - for the festival, you know,' the young man said. 'Many come for the *Día de los Muertos* here. It is - it is -' he rolled his eyes and held a hand in the air to indicate its importance.

He had an accent Eric could not place precisely: it might have been German, Austrian - perhaps Swiss? As if aware of this speculation, the young man held out his hand and introduced himself. 'André Bernstein,' he announced, and of course that could be from any one of those countries, thought Eric.

'Have you been here long?' he asked, not being able to think of a more original opening to a dialogue in a Mexican inn in a town visited by tourists.

'Here? Four years now. I came to spend one night in the inn, met Paola, never left,' he laughed, happily. 'She cast a spell - like in a fairy story, no?'

Eric thought that if it were like a spell in a fairy story, then it was bound to break one day which would be sad for the father who was playing so delightedly with his son, capturing him every time he tried to slip away. Eventually the child did wriggle free and escape, choosing the moment when the father launched upon his story, one he clearly enjoyed telling. It was a fairly commonplace story for these times - about a boy who had grown up in a small town in the Alps, developed the 'wanderlust' he said, made his way

on a cargo ship to Costa Rica, then gone backpacking north into Guatemala and to Yucatán where he ran into the rainy season and with it the swarms of mosquitoes that found his blood sweet to devour, came down with malaria and began to pine for mountain air. Northwards, then, to the high sierra where he recovered his health – and, in Paola, so much more. His expression melted like butter, in uxurious bliss.

‘Other foreigners have come here and stayed too, have they not?’ Eric probed, his tiredness combining with the red wine to make him less nimble, less discreet than he was by nature.

He saw at once that he had been clumsy and too abrupt by the way the fair-haired man’s expression altered as if the soft butter, the melting wax of it, had suddenly stiffened. He no longer looked so pleased as when he was telling his ‘fairy story’. Eric was clearly suggesting that it was not an uncommon story, that it was much the same as that of others – and no one cares to hear that. Each stranger, each traveller needs to think his story unique.

But having blundered, Eric felt helpless to stop himself. ‘Doña Vera who lives in the Hacienda de la Soledad below, that is her story too, perhaps?’

Now the young man looked at him, astounded. Then he bent over with laughter. He tipped back his chair and roared with it, his face flushed with it. As he laughed and continued to laugh, Eric found himself flushing too, with annoyance. He failed to see the joke and was about to say so when André spluttered, ‘So, you are one of *those*, eh?’

‘One of –?’

‘Those who travel to her hacienda – de la Soledad, ha! – to pay homage –’ he began to chuckle again, helplessly – ‘homage to *la Reina de la Sierra*. Is that not how she is known to all of you?’

‘I had never even heard of her a week ago,’ Eric protested, ‘and did not come for her sake but for the mountain –’